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Article (Accepted Version)

Long, Caroline, Graven, Mellony, Sayed, Yusuf and Lampen, Erna (2017) Enabling and constraining conditions of professional teacher agency: the South African context. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 14 (1). pp. 5-21. ISSN 0973-1849

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Enabling and Constraining Conditions of Professional Teacher Agency: The South African Context

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Abstract

The South African people have a history of resistance to domination, injustice and inequality. It is therefore surprising that there has been an increase in social inequality, since the start of political democracy in 1994. Recently, the five teachers' unions refused to administer the Annual National Assessments. This action indicates some resistance to domination. In this paper, we will first explore the concept of professional teacher agency in the light of teaching, both as a profession and as a vocation, constrained by prior experience and social context. Secondly, we will draw on the current assessment context to outline its problems and perspectives, and consider the enabling and constraining conditions for teacher agency. Thirdly, we will discuss how assessment as a tool for monitoring teacher performance may impede the conditions for quality education. Finally, we would like to propose that the delivery of a good quality education requires adopting a teacher education model which supports agency, and in which the design of diagnostic assessments is locally responsive.

Keywords

South Africa, teacher agency, systemic assessment, teacher education

Introduction

The South African people have a long history of resistance to domination, injustice and inequality that countered both colonialism and apartheid and culminated in the establishment of a democracy in 1994. However, despite this momentous event, the colonial and apartheid legacy left its mark in a country striving for a more equitable way of life for its people. It is indeed surprising that almost twenty-two years after the establishment of democracy, inequality has in fact increased.

Critical moments such as the 1956 women's march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria remain in the collective memory of many South Africans. This march, undertaken by 20, 000 women, was to protest against the demeaning requirement to carry 'pass books'. The women sang '*Wathint' Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokodo*' (You strike the women, you strike the rock). This resistance song has come to symbolise the courage and strength of the South African women who would not submit to domination without protest. Despite the advent of political democracy in 1994 and the subsequent transformative education agenda, the defining features of colonisation and apartheid, namely segregation and inequity, remain entrenched in the society even today. On the Gini coefficient, a measure of financial inequality, South Africa ranks among the worst countries, suggesting the country is even more unequal than it was at the end of Apartheid (World Bank, 2011). Therefore it may be posited that the education agenda that has been in place over the past two decades has not yet succeeded in its averred goal of social transformation.

The legacy of apartheid continues to cast its long shadow on post-apartheid education transformation and shape teacher agency. Firstly, Apartheid policies such as the Bantu Education Act of 1952 created qualification imbalances associated with teacher education. Essentially, the demand and supply of teachers during apartheid was based on 'the need to

maintain racial and ethnic segregation’ (Sayed, 2002, p. 382). Secondly, legislation such as the Bantu Education Act of 1953 led to segregated education departments governing the schools and teacher education institutions designated for white, black, coloured, and Indian learners and teachers (CHE, 2010, p. 8; Sayed, 2002, p. 381). By the end of the 1980s, there were 18 colleges for whites, 2 colleges for Indians, 16 colleges for coloureds, and 13 colleges for blacks in what was apartheid South Africa (CHE, 2010, p. 8). In addition, there were more than 78 colleges of teacher education scattered throughout the designated homelands within South Africa (CHE 2010, p. 8). Thirdly, the quality of knowledge imparted at the different institutions was not recognised as being the same. The universities believed their qualifications equipped students to teach with a strong knowledge base. The colleges, on the other hand, were sceptical of the universities’ academic emphasis and insisted that induction into the profession depended on sustained practice (CHE, 2010, p. 8). Fourthly, the content taught at the different institutions did not necessarily include all subjects. Sayed (2002, p. 382) argues that ‘most of the graduates from black teacher training colleges were trained in subjects such as religious studies and history’ and were underdeveloped in areas of mathematics, science, and technology. The combination of minimum levels of literacy and numeracy expected by African teachers in teacher education colleges and the under resourcing of schooling for African children contrasted sharply with the education provided to white teachers in post-secondary school colleges of education coupled with greater resources (Chisholm, 2012). This set of events resulted in the creation of a highly unequal, fragmented and racial system of teacher education with inconsistency in quality, knowledge and skills across the system. Further, inequitable qualifications and maldistribution coupled with an absence of ‘quality assurance procedures and mechanisms’ (Sayed, 2002, p. 382), produced ‘generations of teachers of all races, with distorted and deficient understandings of themselves, of each other, and of what was expected of them in a divided society’ (Essop,

cited in DBE & DHET, 2011, p. 19). To address this, the post-apartheid government's transformation plan focused on introducing major changes in the governance and curricula of teacher education to bring about redress, equity, efficiency, and quality, and trained the teachers to implement this new school curriculum (CHE, 2010, p. 9).

Some sixty years after the Women's March, in September 2015, the five major teachers' unions each representing different sectors of the teacher population drew the line on systemic testing, 'We will not be administering the ANAs [Annual National Assessments] in 2015'. Their reason was: they 'strongly believe that the ANA in its current form, is not in the best interest of our learners [nor in the best interests of] the provision of quality education.' (NAPTOSA, 21st September, 2015).

Each of the five major teacher unions, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA), the National Teachers' Union (NATU), the Professional Educators Union (PEU) and the SA Onderwysunie (SAOU), has a history which goes back to the apartheid years. Currently, they all offer professional development programmes for their members. They also receive support from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) for professional development activities, which support the teacher's subject knowledge or present strategies for working in multilingual classrooms. It is increasingly common that the unions, while having some internal differences, present a united front when dealing with issues that concern all teachers. While these concerns do comprise negotiations around salaries and working conditions of teachers, and issues of discipline, they also include matters of national importance such as the Annual National Assessments (ANAs).

The South African Council of Educators (SACE 2016) is the official government-endorsed 'professional council for educators' whose professed aim is to 'to ensure that the

education system is enriched, by providing properly registered and professionally developed educators that would display professionalism. ' . SACE is also responsible for teacher registration as well as for overseeing professional development of teachers.

In addition to the unions, there are professional organizations such as the Association of Mathematics Teachers of South Africa (AMESA), which is the forum for mathematics teachers. Members of this association meet annually at a congress where workshops are conducted and papers are presented. There are nine regional AMESA bodies representing the nine provinces. These bodies organise local conferences and workshops to address the teachers' needs for within subject professional development. Similar professional organisations exist for other subjects as well. However, the unions appear to be the sole forum where teachers can collectively deliberate and confer across their subject areas about issues such as systemic assessment that affect all teachers.

Dissatisfied with the ANAs, both in terms of the design of the test and the mode of administration, and the publishing of results of individual schools and districts, the leadership of the five unions requested that a task force be set up comprising representatives of the unions and the Department of Basic Education. The unions further requested that the task force engage in discussions the outcome of which 'will be a truly systemic and diagnostic tool that will add value to the system and contribute towards the attainment of quality education for our children and improved teacher development.' The leadership further stated that 'any intimidation or reprisal towards the teachers will be counter to the spirit of the task team and [counter to] joint collaboration.' This resistance was truly a case of '*Wathint' Abafundisi, Wathint' Imbokodo*' (You strike the teachers, you strike the rock).

It may be said that the teacher unions, were resisting domination by the authorities and were calling for engagement as befits a body of professional teachers. Were the teachers' unions,

on behalf of their members, asserting their right to dignity, to be regarded as worthy, honoured and esteemed individuals? Or were they evading the accountability processes thought to be necessary for education systems in the twenty-first century to function optimally?

In a context of growing inequity and transformation, the agency of teachers as exemplified by this action warrants further reflection and attention. In this paper we will explore professional teacher agency in the light of teaching as a vocation which is highly specialised and which requires a substantial degree of self-cultivation. However, contrasted with this ideal view we would like to acknowledge that agency is conditioned by past experiences and lived realities of the teachers. Secondly, in light of this ideal of a professional teacher, we will draw on the current assessment context to outline the problems and perspectives faced by professional agency. In this context, we will consider the enabling and constraining conditions for teacher agency as exemplified by the teachers' stance towards the ANAs. Thirdly, in relation to the broader construct of a professional agency, we will attempt to focus on how assessment as a tool for informing teacher development and for alleviating public concern with the quality of education, can create the conditions for the emergence of quality education. Finally, we will reflect on the growing global consensus on the importance of quality education and of teachers as key agents in delivering good quality education in South Africa.

The Teaching Vocation

The term vocation evokes the notion of a calling, a notion that has often been associated with teaching. Higgins (2011) recalls the philosophical roots of teaching as a vocation, but aligns this notion with teaching as a profession. The opposition by the teacher unions to ANAs may be seen in the light of teaching as a vocation, where the interests of the learners are closely aligned with the wellbeing of the teacher. That having been said, their resistance was not to

the assessment itself, but was about the establishment of a more holistic and systemic approach to improving quality. But what does this assertion mean?

The argument in this paper is that education is intrinsically about self-cultivation on the part of the learner as well as the teacher. According to Higgins, we propose that ‘achieved and ongoing self-cultivation on the part of the teacher is necessary (though not sufficient) for fostering self-cultivation in [learners]’ (Higgins, 2011, p. 3). This necessary condition of self-cultivation is critical, because ‘the teacher’s work (is) at the very site where human cultures preserve themselves and challenge themselves to grow’ (ibid., p. 245). The aware and fulfilled teacher has access to conversations that recall the past by recounting experiences and debates, as well as to the current lived experiences of the learners and their communities, and plays a part in the future vision and hopes of the cultural project that encompasses them all. However, to achieve self-fulfilment through self-cultivation in education, we need a bedrock of purposiveness and continuity (Higgins, 2011) that spans generations of teachers and learners, as well as future political changes. It is only when this bedrock can be maintained, that teaching can create a ‘rich effective world whose dimensions are measured by the breadth of our ongoing dialogues between generations, across the disciplines, and about the means and ends of human development’ (ibid., p. 248).

This bedrock condition is however hard to maintain in practice. In the South African environment many teachers are leaving teaching for other jobs, others are demoralised and truant from school (Graven, 2014); and there are also teachers who we may say have lost their calling and who do not live up to the worthy vocation of teaching. Msibi and Mchunu (2013) attribute such problems in the system to the ‘historical apartheid construction of teachers, which positioned white teachers as professionals while casting African teachers as technicians’ (p. 19). According to them, the current education authorities have given up on

the post 1994 professional agenda, which would have led to empowered teachers, and have instead opted to create a ‘teacher-proof’ curriculum, making teachers feel unimportant.

Whatever the reasons for this educational impasse, current literature suggests that some teachers may indeed have lost direction and some may even have temporarily lost purposiveness and continuity. Hence the sense of vocation or calling, and the related identity of a professional teacher has been disrupted.

We must therefore ask what is it about the teachers’ surroundings that impacts their vocation, and their consequent identity as a professional teacher? Can the responsibility for quality education lie solely with the individual teacher? Or does the problem of poor quality education, as is variously claimed, lie with the all-powerful unions? Or do we need to review the range of educational contexts, and consider whether the current education curriculum is appropriate for the diverse contexts in which it must be implemented? Has the authority of the teacher been undermined?

It is perhaps because of the importance of education that teachers are bombarded from all directions; from the learners, the parents, their own colleagues, the school governing bodies, and education researchers. Economists engaged in educational research, with their conversions of nuanced education phenomena into hard currency, contribute to the narrative of blaming the teachers rather than suggesting constructive ways which may enable teachers to teach effectively within our South African context of extreme social and economic inequality. The question here is whether teachers will retain their commitment to the ‘finer-grained purposes embedded in the practice of teaching’ (Higgins, 2011, p. 278), while critiques and calls for teacher testing and increased teacher monitoring dominate the educational landscape.

It is pertinent to note that the critiques and performance statistics seldom hold the associated provincial department of education accountable for providing quality ongoing teacher support. This is especially pertinent in provinces where performance and accountability of provincial departments have been so problematic that the departments have been taken over by the national department. How can one hold teachers accountable for poor ANA results when learners in the previous grades did not have a teacher for the preceding two years because the department failed to allow the school to appoint replacements for teachers who had left? Or when a teacher with no training in a specific subject area is required to teach that subject? For teachers to maintain their professionalism, they must therefore contextualise the critique that has the potential to undermine their ability to teach, and engage with educational research that is designed to inform their practice. Moreover, the professional teacher in the current educational climate must selectively and strategically, with the eye of a ‘connoisseur’ (Eisner, 1977), take on board that which enriches and inspires the individuals of the future generation.

Here we seek to argue that the phenomenon of what has been called teacher agency or professional agency (Long & Lampen, 2014, 2015) is the condition required for teachers to remain focussed, to hold the line, and to engage with the authorities where necessary in the interests of good education, in Higgin’s (2011) words, maintain purposiveness and continuity. Various other definitions of agency have also been circulated (Eteläpelto, Vahasantanen, Hokka, & Paloniemi, 2013), the most pertinent of which is the ecological view proposed by Biesta and Tedder (2006), and extended by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2013, 2015). Essentially, agency has been defined as the way in which people ‘critically shape their responses to problematic situations’ (Biesta & Tedder, 2006 in diverse contexts (Sayed et al 2016). The ecological view of this implies that agency does not primarily reside in the teacher but is an outcome of the teacher acting meaningfully within the educational and social milieu.

A natural consequence of this outcome is that policy decisions with regard to the day to day role of teachers can either facilitate or hinder their agency. It is against these policy decisions concerning the administration of systemic testing, unilaterally decided, and centrally implemented, that the teachers' unions are protesting.

We would like to propose at this point that only an agentic teacher can fulfil the requirements of the vocation of teaching as transformation, maintain purposiveness and continuity and inspire whole cohorts of youth at school (and not just the elite few), while simultaneously warding off bombardment from the media, well-meaning education departments, and other interested by-standers. A non-agentic teacher, without a vision for a transformed society, without the full range of learner interest at heart, and without professional knowledge such as is required to understand the complexity of systemic testing, has little or no potential to transform her engagement with the subject or the learners in order to effect meaningful and sustained social transformation.

Enabling and Constraining Factors for Professional Agency

A clear and full understanding of the teacher as professional has to become the starting point for any healthy education system. The teacher as envisaged by Batra (2009), and within the South African context, cannot function as a professional when curricula statements are used as the final compliance device. When teachers are primarily concerned with compliance to narrow state imperatives through the machinations of systemic testing, they cannot succeed in enabling independent and autonomous thinkers, which is the purpose of education as advanced by Biesta (2009b).

The structures put in place by the authorities charged with the responsibility of managing the education system, may be categorised as: authorisation of a curriculum, monitoring of the

implementation of the curriculum, and monitoring of the attainment of the curriculum. These three phases of educational planning may be both enabling and constraining and require a balancing act between the authorities and the professional teacher body, between the perceived needs of the state and the perceived needs of the teacher. We will focus primarily on monitoring of the attained curriculum, where the balance across departmental authorities and the professional teachers' unions is being negotiated.

Assessment and Teacher Agency

So how does assessment impact teachers? How does the current implementation of a systemic assessment programme enable or constrain the agency of teachers?

The request by the teacher unions to review the ANAs is not new. The unions have communicated with the Department of Basic Education over the past three years to express their unhappiness with the way the ANAs are being used and administered (Cereseto & Joseph, 2015; NAPTOSA, 2015). This seemingly radical stand against the ANAs is a response to the growing stress/distress of the members of the teacher unions because of the pressure on them to abandon teaching to the curriculum and to 'teach' the ANAs. The impact of some forms of systemic testing on the quality of teaching is well documented, for example the narrowing of the curriculum (Jennings & Bearak, 2014), and teaching to the test (Graven & Venkat, 2014).

Graven and Venkat's (2014) research with primary teachers across Gauteng and the Eastern Cape shows high levels of initial support for the aims and objectives of the ANAs in standardising and communicating assessment expectations and for supporting quality teaching and learning. However, the teachers raised several concerns in relation to the implementation of the ANAs. A key issue raised was the amount of teaching time the ANAs

consume. Their study, which involved 54 primary teachers across 21 schools, showed that the amount of time spent preparing for, administering and marking the ANAs ranged from 2 to 6 weeks, with an average of 3.98 reported weeks (Graven & Venkat, 2014).

A second key area of concern related to the issue of ‘care’ for learners, especially those learners who struggled to read or access the language of the ANAs and were consequently unable to participate meaningfully in tests. Since teachers from Grade 3 upward are not allowed to read the questions to learners, or mediate in any way, and since ‘strangers’ invigilate learners under strict test conditions, several teachers felt that this testing protocol interfered with their responsibility of caring for their learners. They reported high levels of anxiety in young learners while taking these tests and their own frustration at not being able to support learners in managing these emotions.

This research raises interesting points: it suggests that a systemic focus on monitoring and compliance may interfere with the core identities of teachers as it is these teachers who should provide fair and valid assessments of their ‘local’ learners, and care for their wellbeing. Thus tension exists between a fair and valid assessment for a specific group of learners, given the teacher’s local knowledge of learner reading and language levels, for example, and the curriculum covered by the date of assessment, in contrast to the systemic assessment, a standardised process which particularly disadvantages those for whom English is not the mother tongue. Analysis of the linguistic complexity index of the 2013 ANA items reveals high English/mathematical language demands even for first language English learners (Sibanda & Graven, 2015), thereby supporting the teachers’ unease about the fairness of these assessments for the learners.

The over-emphasis on systemic-type assessment also highlights an emerging global phenomenon to regard regular testing as a proxy for improving quality. Sayed, Kanjee and

Rao (2014) argue that while assessment and testing are important, these activities cannot be a substitute or panacea for enhancing teacher competence and for improving the quality of teaching-learning. To use an analogy, an under-nourished child does not improve her/his nutritional status by being weighed regularly. Similarly, teaching and learning does not improve by regular testing. To improve quality, teachers need learning opportunities in which teacher experience (and their particular local experience) guides their life long professional development in ways that acknowledge their key role in enabling learning in their classrooms.

We would like to propose here that the notion of assessment for learning, and as a means of learning, has been somewhat distorted by the focus on external assessment (Kanjee & Moloi, 2014). Long, Dunne & Mokoena (2014), drawing on the work of Bennett & Gitomer (2009), proposed a teaching model where assessment, learning and teaching, are closely aligned. Projects further exploring this close relationship, while supporting the teachers' professional agency and identity are in process currently at sites around the country (Van der Nest, Long & Engelbrecht, in process).

Teacher Agency, Accountability and Research

The debate concerning the ANAs raises the issue of whether teachers in South Africa as well as across the world are asserting their identities as professional teachers and exerting professional agency in response to situations that are in their judgment educationally unsound and running counter to what might be described as “good education”. ? A counter view is that the teachers are evading accountability.

It can be argued that in South Africa, the general public and indeed many education researchers regard the unions and the show of teacher solidarity as highly problematic as the

view is that teachers are defending their “lack content knowledge” . The implications of this “lack” is far from clear. The poor results of systemic type assessments, inferred to be due to the teachers’ lack of knowledge, are often used to indiscriminately argue in favour of more teacher testing (NDP, 2013). In this scenario, the unions are seen as a stumbling block in improving the quality of education. Moreover, they are perceived as protecting the members who possess inadequate ‘content knowledge’ and are performing badly. This view that teacher unions (and therefore their constituencies) are acting counter to the betterment of education, and defending and condoning poor practice, is mostly based on the notion that teachers, as servants of the state, are required to simply implement a curriculum designed by external consultants, with little discussion or consultation with them. This emerging lack of involvement of the teacher body has not always been the case. In previous curricula revisions, there was greater consultation with professional bodies, such as the AMESA. An approach to the teaching of mathematics for example, that provides exemplary resources that can serve to support teachers, teacher educators and department officials, with assessment that is aligned with teaching and learning rather than “teacher tests” would be preferable.

Graven (2014) warns against educational researchers who despite having limited engagement with the real task of teaching, use numbers and variously calculated percentages to undermine the teaching profession. Graven argues:

... it is important to consider the ethics of our research. In many studies the voices of teachers, parents and students are largely absent. It is critical that researchers seek to tell stories of educational opportunities and success in relation to low SES [socio-economic status] learners, low SES schools and learner performance so as to counter the pervasive message of hopelessness and inevitable failure that permeates correlation studies. While societal inequality must be reduced in order to support

educational equity and quality for all, and as citizens we must push our politicians and society for this [change] to happen, we cannot wait for this [reduction]. As researchers we need to play our part in examining the spaces within the current ‘crisis’ that enable those from low SES backgrounds and schools to challenge the ‘inevitability’ implied by correlation findings.

Indeed, the ANAs with their alarmingly low national average results, particularly among poorer schools, are often used to promote a deficit picture that gives little hope. Such data often entrenches low expectations of learners from poor backgrounds which is in itself a key feature that contributes to a vicious cycle of failure and a self-fulfilling prophecy. Here the unions, in particular the SAOU, question the validity of the tests when the outcomes differ so radically from classroom based assessment as sanctioned by the curriculum (Monamo, 2015). Our argument would be that for assessments to enable transformation, the tests have to be carefully designed to provide critical diagnostic information at the start of the academic year (currently ANAs are written at the end of the year). Networks of related curriculum support materials could be provided to ensure that key foundation concepts from earlier grades are also accessed and taught. Here we would like to acknowledge the potential for engaging the education community, including teachers, in designing intermittent markers of progress that can be used to alert both teachers and learners to areas of need, while also acknowledging mastery.

Discussion and Conclusion

The recent upheavals in the South African education system, for example the refusal on the part of teachers to support the systemic assessment programme, may be variously explained as the teachers resisting the accountability process required of large education systems, or teachers not acting in the interests of the learners. It may also be attributed to the teachers’

growing awareness of the importance of their role in the education of the learners, the importance of protecting the vocation from the attentions of many a well-meaning reporter or researcher, and a cry to be regarded as worthy, honoured and esteemed.

Much of the argument and current debate across teacher unions, and professional teacher bodies, the Department of Basic Education, the teacher training institutions and the general public view the teacher either as an implementing agent, or as an autonomous professional. In practice, the teacher should be accorded full protection of their status as professionals, rather than be subjected to the blanket criticism of un-nuanced opinion or to a bias from the perspective of testing, or from a particular research focus, that does not embrace the broader goals of the teaching vocation.

Taking the themes of emancipation and dignity as critical components of the South African classroom, we would like to propose that teacher education, both in-service and pre-service, should focus on the construct of human agency, by which we mean the unique capacity of individuals to engage with their environments, identify problems and find solutions. For the evolving teachers, the need to develop an inner strength and an outer vision and a focus on self-cultivation so as to engage with the classroom environment, the larger school and national community demands attention to the multiple aspects comprising agency. We understand the construct agency as something that enables teachers to act in the complex educational and social environments they inhabit. Here we would like to note that elements of the Bachelor in Education programme as envisaged and enacted by Batra (2005, 2009), where attention is given to the self, to conceptions of knowledge, and to socio-political structures, provide this pre-service teacher education focus. We acknowledge that teachers currently exhibit varying levels of agency in the complex schools and environments in which they find themselves. Therefore any intervention should explore existing evidence of agency,

engage current strengths, and then further support and enable professional agency, while taking into account the constraining features of the environment.

What are the characteristics that might distinguish the agentic teacher in a poor South African community from a non-agentic teacher? Clearly, time in the classroom, quality of preparation and quality of engagement with learners during and after lessons are markers of dedication. The agentic teacher will construct suitable formative assessment tools for her own classroom, and contribute draft assessment items to provincial resources from which systemic assessments may be assembled. How to support the understanding of assessment principles beyond compliance to an external requirement is indeed a challenge that should be taken up by subject professional bodies such as AMESA.

The classroom is a necessary but not a sufficiently comprehensive location for agency and professional conduct. However, an agentic teacher could take the personal initiative to make and record reports for provincial education departments and principals about learning conditions and structural realities of the students. These could include relevant information about child-headed households, vulnerable children, homes with no food, households with no taps or plugs, unsafe roads and pathways to schools, water and sanitation conditions at the school, hygiene needs, sight and hearing limitations, safety concerns, school security, dilapidation of buildings and facilities, arrival of textbooks and learning support materials, school-feeding success and abuses, learner and school transport conditions, and more. In return, the teacher will expect official responses from those entrusted with the resources and tools to assist with these problems. The agentic teacher is the key player in ensuring that no one in provincial education departments can say they were never informed about conditions on the ground. Such teachers actively defend their struggles with departmental officials. As one Grade 4–7 mathematics teacher, Zandi, noted in an interview:

We tell the subject advisor that I am actually at Grade 2, CAPS [Curriculum and Assessment Policy Standards] says I must teach this [grade 4]. But my learners are not yet on that level. That means I have to go [back] to Grade 3 work. They [district subject advisors] said, ‘No. it is wrong!’ They [the district officials] know that some learners struggle, or whatever, but we are wrong to go back to Grade 2, or Grade 3. We always argue about that ... They say it is from the top not from them ... [I say] ...What do you do to this kind of a learner? Do you expect me to teach them and what does the learner still struggle with? [...] Then how do I do that. ... I am frustrating that learner more, not only that learner but myself because I am going to go nowhere with that learner. (Graven, 2016, p. 9–10)

In the current scenario, an agentic department official will value and engage the so-called inconvenient voices that demand that the short-term and long-term needs of the learners be noted and addressed. How can this sense of agency be recognised and supported? An important aspect of this approach is that attention to both individual and collective agency is required. The concept of political agency (Batra, 2015) points to the need for a greater vision concerning the many facets that impact education in South Africa, and indeed globally.

The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (UNDP, 2015) has as an overarching goal to ‘Ensure equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030’. The targets point to the provision of quality education and to the teacher as the key agent in achieving it. South Africa has a constitutional commitment to democracy and sustainable development. It appears that the broader education community embraces these goals; the need is therefore to support the agency of teachers through multiple means including an approach to assessment that integrates teaching, learning and assessment, and that is focused on improving the learning attainment of all, particularly the marginal. While the relatively narrow focus

assessment is necessary, this project has to be positioned within the “ongoing process of deepening democracy in a plural society”, a goal that Batra (2014) advocates for India and that we support for South Africa.

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